Nixon Trip: Risks at Home and Abroad

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By Carroll Kilpatrick
Washington Post Staff Writer

President Nixon, a man who likes what he calls "historic firsts," will chalk up two more this week: he will be the first American President to visit Israel and several Arab countries and he will be the first American President to leave the country while under an impeachment investigation.

Despite Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger's assertion that foreign policy is not conducted in relation to Watergate, they are related in the minds of the American people, in the minds of the leaders with whom the President will confer and, probably most important of all, in the mind of the President himself. Foreign policy could be his last line of defense.

Twice this month the President will try to disengage himself from the impeachment process while undertaking journeys overseas. The Middle East trip is being squeezed in before the trip to the Soviet Union later in the month for the ostensible purpose of maintaining the momentum achieved by the Israeli-Syrian disengagement agreement.

Critics are asking, however, what is to be accomplished, why the President insists upon making two arduous and potentially dangerous trips in one month and whether he is not using foreign policy for partisan political ends.

Any foreign travel by a President involves high risks and requires extensive planning. Yet the trip to the Middle East was not announced until last Tuesday and it was not definite until the Syrian-Israeli agreement was hammered out a few days before.

The advance teams of Secret Service agents, communications experts and others that must precede a presidential visit did not leave Washington until a week ago. Normally, they would have been dispatched at least two or three weeks in advance.

When the advance teams finish their preparations in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Syria (where the United States has no diplomatic representation), Israel and Jordan, they probably will go directly on to the Soviet Union to prepare for the Summit conference to begin June 27 in Moscow.

After the Middle East tour, Mr. Nixon will return to the United States—for all of five or six days to rest, devote himself to other duties, and to prepare for the Soviet trip.

Official spokesmen argue that the Middle East tour can be of direct tangible benefit to the United States and that it can promote the cause of peace in an area where fighting has broken out four times since World War II.

The officials insist that since the United States at last has gained the confidence of both sides, the President should do all in his power to promote the move toward a solid agreement.

As the President said in his Annapolis speech Wednesday, the trip will afford

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Little Current Repeats

Little Current, which won the Preakness with a brilliant stretch drive on the rail, yesterday won the Belmont Stakes in New York with a charge through the middle for a seven-length victory. Jolly Johu was second, beating Kentucky Derby winner Cannonade in a photo finish.

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an opportunity to explore "ways in which we can continue our progress toward permanent peace in that area."

A respected Middle East expert not connected with the Nixon administration said last week that "of course, the trip is a political one, but it could be worthwhile."

This expert said that the trip will "underline the commitments" of this country in the area, which he regards as essential to a peace agreement.

He supported the President's comment in the Annapolis speech that "a positive American role was indispensable to achieving a permanent settlement in the Middle East."

"The danger is that the President will act as though he has made peace in the Middle East," the expert said. "He hasn't."

In his Annapolis speech, Mr. Nixon did not claim peace, but he did say that it became clear after the October war to moderate Arab leaders and to Washington "that a positive American role was indispensable to achieving a permanent settlement in the Middle East."

The trip will reassert the "positive American role" and further commit the United States to a continuing leadership role in trying to bring about a permanent settlement.

In the effort, the President runs political risks at home. So far, he has been able to bring about rapprochement with Arab leaders without a crisis in relations with Israel or extreme disaffection in the Jewish community in the United States.

But the danger signs are everywhere. The President's Annapolis speech declaring that "we cannot gear our foreign policy to transformation of other societies"—in other words, to requiring the Soviet Union to permit the emigration of Jews—aroused deep resentments in some parts of the country.

Kissinger's Middle East diplomacy was criticized most of all in Israel, and Mr. Nixon could find the coolest welcome of all in Jerusalem

Egyptian President Anwar Sadat was the chief promoter of the President's trip, and Sadat has warmly embraced the United States. He, like Soviet Communist Party leader Leonid I. Brezhnev, now is among the President's most ardent boosters and regards the impeachment drive with grave concern.

The President is assured of an enthusiastic welcome in Egypt, but the enthusiasm in Israel will be much more controlled and will put to a severe test the President's skill in diplomacy.

Nixon administration officials argued that while Kissinger deserves all the plaudits he received for bringing off the Syrian-Israeli agreement, the President also played a major role.

They said that he sent several significant messages during the negotiation to Brezhnev and to Arab leaders and was in frequent telephone communication with then-Prime Minister Golda Meir. Furthermore, these officials affirmed reports that the President insisted that Kissinger persevere on one or two occasions when progress seemed to be impossible.

Although a few voices have been raised on Capitol Hill against the President's foreign travels at a time when he is under the darkest possible cloud at home, the outcry has been muted.

Sen. Richard S. Schweiker (R-Pa.) has said that the Moscow summit "should really be deferred till this (impeachment) matter is cleared up one way or another," and Sen. Henry M. Jackson (D-Wash.) has said that the President may settle for "a quick fix" in arms control in Moscow rather than admit to a failure at this crucial time in the impeachment drive.

But Mr. Nixon has made his decision to embark on the trips and, an even greater outcry against them would not have stopped him. He obviously hopes that they may produce results that will help him stay in office.

Kissinger to Meet W. German Minister

Reuter

Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger will meet West German Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher in West Germany Tuesday while President Nixon stops over in Salzburg, Austria, on his way to the Middle East.

The State Department said the meeting, at an undisclosed location near the Austrian border, would take the place of a meeting that had to be postponed because of Kissinger's month-long stay in the Middle East.